
Attacking al Qaeda's Operational Centers of Gravity

By DAVID M. WITTY

Today, Islamicist organizations are becoming more widespread and diffuse. They often lack a direct connection to al Qaeda's strategic leadership but are inspired by its ideology. Al Qaeda's operational role is subdued, but its ideological, propaganda, and support roles are critical to its affiliates. Many groups now adhere to the original goals and ideology of al Qaeda, which extends the scope of its influence well beyond that of the original organization, although al Qaeda itself is still considered the most dangerous of all transnational extremist groups and is America's principal enemy.¹



Marines and Afghan fighters advance on Taliban positions, Operation Asbury Park

2nd Marine Expeditionary Unit (Keith A. Milks)

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In U.S. joint doctrine, the basis for defeating an enemy is properly identifying its center of gravity (COG) and subsequently attacking it. This concept is applicable to the current war on terror. Al Qaeda is both an ideology and an organization providing operational level inspiration to insurgencies throughout the Muslim world. It has a strategic COG (ideology) and operational COGs (the ability to generate the support of local insurgents and populations). U.S. operational commanders can attack al Qaeda's operational COGs directly or indirectly through the decisive point of *consanguinity*, the ideological affinity between al Qaeda and local insurgents and populations. By designating consanguinity as a decisive point at the operational level and targeting it, one can attack al Qaeda's operational COGs and disconnect local insurgencies from the global insurgency.

Goals, Ideology, and Basis of Support

Al Qaeda's goals and ideology are found in the writings and statements of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, to include a *fatwa*, or religious ruling, which bin Laden himself issued in 1998 declaring war on the United States. Other writings have also appeared by Islamic extremists with ties to bin Laden. They all represent a *Salafi* version of Sunni Islam: fundamentalist, puritanical, and advocating the end of secular governments in the Muslim world.²

There are five principal goals of al Qaeda:

- All U.S. and Western forces must be removed from the Arabian Peninsula, which contains Islam's holiest sites.
- All U.S. forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Muslim lands must be expelled.
- America must stop its support of nations such as Russia, India, and China that oppress Muslims.
- America must stop its support of repressive Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, and stop its support of Israel.
- An Islamic caliphate under the rule of Islamic law must be established in an area corresponding to the historic Islamic empire.³

These goals, along with *Salafi* Islam, comprise the ideology of al Qaeda. Besides imposing Islamic law in an Islamic caliphate,

purged of Western influences, little is discussed. Specifics such as economics are not addressed, other than that the Muslim world's energy resources will be better used.

Ideology is the critical component of extremist movements; it can enable extremists to produce followers faster than they can be killed. However, only a small percentage of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims adhere to al Qaeda's ideology. Most Muslims do not want to live in an Islamic caliphate, and surveys show support among Muslims for Western principles such as elected governments and universal education, although many Muslims sympathize with the causes al Qaeda advocates.

War on Terror as Counterinsurgency

Al Qaeda's jihad is best viewed as a global insurgency. Traditionally, an insurgency has sought to change the government in a single state; however, the global insurgency spans many countries and seeks change in the Islamic world. Its goal is to weaken Western influences, change the balance of power, and establish a caliphate. Al Qaeda integrates local grievances to create the ideological synergy of a global insurgency.⁴ This ideology is applicable at local levels because it is based in the transnational Muslim consciousness. Local issues become part of a global perception of persecution requiring an obligation to fight.⁵

In operational theaters, through operational leaders, insurgents in one country cooperate and coordinate with those in another country. The operational leaders follow al Qaeda's ideology and strategic direction and receive financing and targeting data, and they share tactics, but al Qaeda does not directly control their actions.⁶ There are numerous examples of these connected insurgencies. Abu Sayyaf insurgents in the Philippines, for example, have allied themselves with al Qaeda.⁷ The Taliban in Afghanistan have a close relationship with al Qaeda. In Iraq, there are two major insurgent groups. The first are Iraqi Sunni insurgents who are nationalists and desire to restore a Ba'athist government. They are not concerned with jihad. The second group is al Qaeda insurgents, fighting to establish a caliphate. Some Iraqi nationalist insurgents have joined the al Qaeda insurgents, and others oppose them.⁸

Indeed, the war on terror is best described as a counterinsurgency rather than as a fight against terrorism. Terror is but one component of an insurgency, which usually includes subversion, sabotage, guerrilla

warfare, and propaganda operations. Besides military action, a counterinsurgency approach to the war on terror would include political, economic, psychological, and civic actions to address the causes of the insurgency since the presence of insurgents is a symptom of larger societal issues.⁹ As noted, insurgency traditionally was thought of in terms of a single state, but now counterinsurgency doctrine recognizes global insurgency.¹⁰

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Supplies are dropped to forward operating locations in Afghanistan near Pakistan border



Centers of Gravity

In prosecuting a campaign, the concept of *center of gravity* is central in U.S. joint doctrine; the center of gravity, provides moral or physical strength to the enemy, and a sound campaign plan is based on its proper identification. One COG exists at each level of war—strategic, operational, and tactical. At the strategic level,

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the COG might be a military force, a leader, or national will. At the operational level, it is normally a military force, but it could also be associated with political, economic, social, or belief systems. Creating the proper effects in time and space to attack or neutralize the enemy's COG is the heart of operational art.¹¹

A systems perspective analysis and the identification of decisive points are two other key concepts in campaign prosecution.

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A systems perspective analysis provides an understanding of the interrelated political, social, military, economic, and informational systems. Each system contains nodes and links. Nodes are generally physical, such as people, materiel, or facilities. Links connect nodes and are behavioral or functional; they could be a command relationship or an ideology. A decisive point is a location, event, factor, behavior, or function that, when attacked, gives a marked advantage over an opponent. A decisive point might be a node or a link. Decisive points are not COGs but are the keys to attacking them. The operational environment must be analyzed to determine systems and their nodes and links that can be targeted to affect the COG. These become decisive points.¹² The proper application of these concepts can be difficult. Cultural

challenges complicate the process when they involve an opponent whose beliefs about morality or the value of life are different from one's own. What is fanatical to some might be normal to one's adversaries.¹³

Initially, America misidentified al Qaeda's strategic COG in the war on terror as its leadership—so U.S. strategy focused on eliminating al Qaeda's leaders.¹⁴ Moreover, the war on terror was viewed as counterterrorism; therefore, it focused on eliminating terrorist leaders. In reality, even if bin Laden were killed, his death would have had little impact since there were others to take his place.¹⁵ Today, however, the U.S. national-strategic leadership has properly identified al Qaeda's strategic COG as its ideology, and countering it is a priority. Ideology provides global support and recruits and connects local Islamic insurgencies to the global insurgency. It is through the synergy gained by connecting and combining insurgencies at the theater of operations and state levels to the strategic level that enables al Qaeda to wage global insurgency.

In U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine, an insurgency's COG in almost every case is its ability to generate and sustain popular support among the population. Popular support results in insurgent safe havens, freedom of movement, logistics support, intelligence, and recruits.¹⁶ When applying the counterinsurgency concept to the war on terror, one should view al Qaeda's operational COG as its ability to generate the support of local insurgents and populations in the theaters of operations and in specific countries. In any specific insurgency,

the principal node is the local insurgents/populations who either support or oppose al Qaeda-associated insurgents. The link that connects al Qaeda's operational COG to the local insurgents/populations node is the link of *consanguinity*, which is defined as the relationship between al Qaeda and local insurgents/populations based on an ideological affinity. Here the link of consanguinity is unifying Muslims to resist perceived Western persecution. Consanguinity unites the support of local insurgents/populations in many insurgencies with al Qaeda jihadi insurgents operating at the tactical and operational levels, who in turn connect to al Qaeda's strategic leadership.

Disconnecting local insurgencies from the global insurgency fulfills what David Kilcullen calls a *strategy of disaggregation*, which seeks to break the connection between the operational/tactical levels and the strategic level that enables the insurgency to function globally.¹⁷ The local insurgency will still exist, but it will no longer contribute to the synergy of global insurgency. It is also possible that local insurgents/populations will continue to cooperate with al Qaeda insurgents because both might have mutual short-term goals, such as ending a foreign occupation or overthrowing a particular government. However, if the link between al Qaeda and local insurgents/populations is based merely on pragmatism and not on ideological affinity, the link will eventually dissolve on its own since local insurgents/populations will not support al Qaeda's ultimate goal of establishing a caliphate.

Strengthening or Weakening Operational COGs?

Actions at the national-strategic level can have unintended consequences at the

Left: Soldiers clear house during mission to take insurgent stronghold in Baghdad
Right: Afghan village believed to be sanctuary for al Qaeda and Taliban groups



U.S. Army (Robert Baumgartner)



982nd Signal Company, Combat Camera (Joe Belcher)

operational and tactical levels. Likewise, purely tactical or operational acts can quickly impact the national-strategic level. For example, in September 2006, Pope Benedict XVI, while giving a lecture in Germany, quoted a Byzantine emperor who had characterized Islam as “evil and inhuman.” This comment sparked protests throughout the Muslim world,¹⁸ and its unintended consequences strengthened al Qaeda’s operational COGs, resulting in greater jihadi insurgent support since the West was perceived as attacking Islam and a response was required. In another instance, a popular Arabic language newspaper published in Egypt, *El-Sha’b*, headlined a story in September 2006 stating that U.S. Soldiers had massacred an Iraqi family, including two pregnant women, while the family was eating breakfast.¹⁹ Although the validity of this story from the tactical level is questionable, it had operational impact since America was described as attacking innocent Muslims, which in turn strengthened al Qaeda’s operational COGs since local insurgents/populations will respond to perceived U.S. hostility.

It is imperative that the war on terror not be perceived as a clash of civilizations between the West and Islam since that would further strengthen al Qaeda’s operational COGs. Current American strategy emphasizes that the war on terror is a war of *ideas* but not of *religions*.²⁰ However, comments made by the U.S. national-strategic leadership stating that Muslim terrorists attacked America because they hated its freedom have contributed to the perception of a clash of civilizations. Bin Laden has said he is not attacking America because of its freedom but because of U.S. actions in the Muslim world.²¹ Following the 9/11 attacks, many Muslims supported the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, but others argue that many American actions since 9/11 have increased al Qaeda’s appeal.²² U.S. unilateral acts, or acts without Muslim coalition partners, have strengthened al Qaeda’s operational COGs. At the other extreme, some U.S. acts, such as humanitarian assistance provided to tsunami victims, swung Muslim opinion in favor of America.²³

Recommendations

An operational commander can only attempt to attack the operational COG through the consanguinity link between the local insurgents/population and global jihadi insurgents in his theater of operations. It is the responsibility of others to engage the global insurgency

at the national-strategic level.²⁴ An operational commander must recognize that his actions can have strategic effects and that actions by national-strategic actors can have effects at the operational level. The operational commander must visualize potential unforeseen consequences and avoid actions that might inadvertently strengthen the enemy’s COGs.

An operational commander can attack al Qaeda’s operational COGs directly or indirectly through the decisive point of consanguinity. Indirect attacks are those that increase the legitimacy of the host nation facing the insurgency or the legitimacy of partner nations or U.S. forces supporting the host nation. If the nation is perceived as legitimate, it is meeting its people’s needs; there is no reason to change the government and no need to seek a link with al Qaeda. A second means of indirect attack through consanguinity is to create or exploit differences between local insurgents/populations and al Qaeda. This will cause local insurgents/populations to view al Qaeda’s means and goals as inconsistent with their own. Direct attacks on the operational COGs through consanguinity are those that offer a counterideology to or discredit al Qaeda’s ideology, which will make al Qaeda jihadi insurgents less attractive to local insurgents/populations.

Legitimacy is best achieved by employing the forces of Muslim partner nations or the indigenous forces of the host nation confronting the insurgency. These forces must be perceived as capable of addressing problems without direct U.S. involvement, even if they are not. While U.S. strategy states that the use of force can counter ideology, overt and unilateral U.S. actions will weaken the host nation’s legitimacy and strengthen al Qaeda’s operational COGs by drawing the population closer to jihadi insurgents since America will be viewed as hostile.²⁵ In addition, unilateral, non-Muslim actions against a Muslim nation or community can make it a religious obligation for Muslims to resist.²⁶

There are numerous examples of the successful use of indigenous Muslim forces or the forces of Muslim partner nations that have strengthened legitimacy. The Jordanian army has trained Iraqi counterterrorist forces in Jordan, staffed a military hospital in Iraq, and sealed the Iraqi-Jordanian border,²⁷ which added legitimacy to U.S. actions in Iraq. Sudan, despite being a state sponsor of terror, has arrested al Qaeda members and eliminated training camps in its territory.²⁸ Yemen, with mainly indirect U.S. involvement, has been successful in fighting al Qaeda extremists.

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DOD (Brett Costa)



Iraqi soldier stands security during operation to detain suspected terrorist leaders of insurgent force in Baghdad

Its counterterrorist unit, trained by the United States, has killed or captured al Qaeda members, and al Qaeda's pre-9/11 leadership in Yemen has been eliminated. However, there has been a backlash against the Yemeni government's cooperation with America due to Yemeni detainees at Guantanamo Bay and U.S. policy toward Iraq and Israel.²⁹ An operational commander must consider that even limited, open assistance or host nation support to America can have negative impacts and unforeseen consequences.

Another example of creating legitimacy through cooperation with partners is Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF–HOA), based in Djibouti. Its mission is to deny extremists a base and to create security in an area with weak governments and poverty where al Qaeda has historically operated. CJTF–HOA's footprint is small, but its area of operations includes the Horn of Africa and Yemen. It works with the nations of this region, except Sudan and Somalia, to increase legitimacy through improving living conditions and training local security forces to fight insurgents. The task force's combat operations are conducted discreetly or through partner nations.³⁰ In December 2006, Ethiopian forces, tacitly supported by the task force, invaded Somalia to recapture territory controlled by Islamist forces connected to al Qaeda; this action was followed by a U.S. gunship attack on a target in southern Somalia in January 2007.³¹

While the operational commander should employ indigenous or Muslim partners and assist them in a supporting role, this will not always be possible. Sometimes unilateral operations will be necessary. Mechanisms should then be planned to maintain the legitimacy of a host nation or partners.³² This can be achieved through U.S. low-visibility operations that are below public awareness or that create the impression that a partner nation conducted the operation. Actions without visible U.S. presence could include intelligence operations, legal support, and the use of Special Operations Forces (SOF). Ongoing U.S. SOF operations in the Philippines are an example.³³ If there are still occasions when U.S. forces must conduct operations unilaterally and overtly without the presence of any Muslim partner, an operational commander should plan to quickly replace U.S. forces with Muslim forces to preserve as much legitimacy as possible.

Humanitarian assistance and other civil-military operations can be used to create legitimacy for the host nation facing an insur-

gency, but these must be orchestrated to show that a nation is meeting the needs of its people without being coopted by America. If a government addresses its people's needs, they will not turn to extremists. An operational commander should also attempt to reintegrate local insurgents into mainstream society, which increases the legitimacy of the host nation government in the eyes of the local insurgents/population. In Afghanistan, it is possible to be a moderate Taliban member and still support the Afghan government; allowing moderate opponents to participate in the political process will prevent them from supporting the insurgency.³⁴ In situations where U.S. forces are operating overtly, such as in Iraq, the host nation must be portrayed as in control. For example, an Iraqi

most local insurgents have their own agendas and some wish to have no al Qaeda connection so that their movements will be seen as nationalistic

investigation of possible U.S. human rights abuses will help establish the Iraqi government as legitimate.³⁵

Another means to indirectly attack the operational COG through the decisive point of consanguinity between local insurgents/populations and al Qaeda is to exploit their differences. At operational and tactical levels, most local insurgents have their own agendas and some wish to have no al Qaeda connection so that their movements will be seen as nationalistic. It is also possible at the operational level to exploit divisions within al Qaeda itself or differences between al Qaeda and other extremists. Some non-al Qaeda extremists have condemned al Qaeda's methods since they believe the group is hurting Islam.³⁶

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was al Qaeda's operational commander in Iraq. Unlike other senior al Qaeda leaders, he favored attacks on the Shi'a, and he believed that ordinary Sunni Iraqis could be targeted to create terror. His extreme methods drove some Sunnis away and divided al Qaeda in Iraq. Within extremist circles, his attacks on Muslims became a source of contention. One extremist ideologue, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, condemned Zarqawi's methods, which were turning the world against Muslims. Al-Maqdisi advised jihadis not to go to Iraq.³⁷ In July 2005, Zawahiri sent a letter to Zarqawi, which was intercepted. In it, he

told Zarqawi to stop attacks on the Shi'a and to stop killing hostages. Zarqawi continued his methods, and al Qaeda strategic leaders told jihadis to go elsewhere instead of Iraq.³⁸

In Iraq, Zarqawi used Fallujah as his base, but some of its citizens disagreed with his methods and his extreme *Salafi* beliefs. The Ba'athist insurgents of Fallujah wanted to end the U.S. occupation of Iraq but disapproved of Zarqawi's kidnappings, indiscriminate bombings, and destruction of Iraq's infrastructure. Fighting began between al Qaeda and Ba'athists in Fallujah, which the U.S. Joint Psychological Operations Task Force exploited to increase tensions. However, when attempting to split insurgent groups, an operational commander should ensure that he will not worsen the situation; exploiting Sunni-Shi'a differences would not be beneficial and could lead to civil war. In fact, civil war, accelerated by al Qaeda jihadis and the Shi'a opposition, describes key characteristics of violence in Iraq today.³⁹

Information operations (IO) can directly or indirectly attack the operational COGs through the consanguinity link. All IO assets should be used in concert with public diplomacy, public affairs, and interagency assets to achieve a synergetic communications effect. Through the link of consanguinity, IO can indirectly attack the COGs by creating legitimacy for U.S. military assistance to Muslim nations. The theme can stress that nearly 7 million Muslims live in America where freedom of religion is protected. Muslims are integrated into American society, are respected, and enjoy a high standard of living. The theme would also stress that America has never engaged in religious wars and has never proselytized Christianity. America has provided aid and military assistance to Muslim societies and ended the ethnic cleansing attacks against Muslims in the former Yugoslavia.

An IO theme to directly attack al Qaeda's operational COGs through consanguinity is to portray life in an imagined Islamic caliphate, which many Muslims would not prefer. Life without Western products, access to a Western-style education, or any Western influences is not what most desire. This IO campaign should incorporate moderate Muslim clerics who can explain that al Qaeda's ideology is un-Islamic and that warfare as depicted in the Koran is generally compatible with the spirit of international law and the Geneva Conventions: it forbids hostilities against noncombatants and attacks such as those that occurred on 9/11.⁴⁰

This combined information campaign would do more harm to al Qaeda's operational COGs than any exclusively U.S. efforts. Attempts should also be made to coopt universities, mosques, and religious schools to promote a counterideology to al Qaeda.

While we believe that democracy is the ultimate answer to extremism, terrorism, and insurgency, it should be applied with restraint in Muslim societies. An operational commander should avoid trying to reshape a Muslim nation into a semblance of America. Of the 57 member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, only Turkey has a long-functioning democracy, and no clear separation of religion and government exists in Islam. It would be hard for Muslims to establish a democracy without religious elements. In Afghanistan, attempts to impose Western-style democracy, religious tolerance, and gender rights are fundamentally counter to the culture, and these efforts are strengthening al Qaeda's support.

America must use extreme restraint when conducting unilateral, overt combat operations in the Muslim world since such actions will strengthen al Qaeda's operational COGs. While historical examples of Western success with a unilateral, overt approach in the Muslim world exist, we live in an age of real-time communications. What occurs in one Muslim nation occurs in all Muslim nations through a Muslim global consciousness that demands resistance to perceived hostility. Attacks on al Qaeda's operational COGs through the decisive point of consensus offer the best chance of weakening the COGs, since most other U.S. actions will only strengthen them. **JFQ**

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